DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 428 HE 033 026

AUTHOR	Fincher, Cameron
TITLE	The Consolation of Scholarship. IHE Perspectives.
INSTITUTION	Georgia Univ., Athens. Inst. of Higher Education.
PUB DATE	1999-05-00
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Institute of Higher Education, Meigs Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-1772; Tel: 706-542-3464; fax: 706-542-7588; Web site: http://service.uga.edu/ihe/.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Principles; *Educational Research; Educational Researchers; Effective Schools Research; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Institutional Research; Institutions; *Scholarship; Self Evaluation (Groups); *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

This monograph discusses some of the difficulties that colleges and universities encounter when they seek to study themselves. It finds that despite commendable efforts to establish doctoral programs in higher education, institutes and centers for the study of higher education, and offices of institutional research, there are many discrepancies between what is known and what is believed about institutions of higher learning. The most publicized criticism of educational research has been its inability to demonstrate the effectiveness of federally funded programs. The essay goes on to examine the establishment of centers for research in higher education as part of the movement to support research on issues and problems related to postsecondary education, and the later shift of federal funding which directed research toward evaluation, planning, and management. The essay also examines the role of institutional research for data-gathering and reporting, as well as for organizational and operational purposes, concluding that educational research has not had any sustained influence in the reform of education at any level. The essay concludes that higher education is, nonetheless, worthy of study with the best of scholarly methods, and that as a field of doctoral study, higher education should be the "study of institutions." (CH)

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by Cameron Fincher

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In 1983 the Institute of Higher Education issued a two-year annual report entitled "The Consolation of Scholarship." Considering the "time of troubles" in which education was then engaged, the liberties taken with the title of Boethius' (523 A.D.)[1] "The Consolation of Philosophy" were entirely appropriate.

Throughout the 1970s, education at all levels experienced the after-shocks of "the soaring sixties" and looking back, many of us would quickly decline any opportunity to relive "the turbulent years" of 1968-1973. For many colleges and universities, the years of student protests and faculty dissent in the 1960s were followed by a decade or more of public dissent—in the form of withdrawn support, federal regulations, and a significant loss of institutional autonomy and public confidence.

In the nation's bicentennial year, a noted educator[2] wrote that a citizen returning from 1776 would not recognize contemporary farms, factories, and homes. He or she, however, could walk into a typical classroom and recognize immediately what was going on. There might be a bit of "cultural shock" in the school's heating, lighting, air conditioning, and subject content—but the visitor would be amazed at the similarities between 1776 and 1976.

In national dialogues[3] concerning the problems of public and private schools, the limitations of resources and the lateness with which research skills had been applied to school problems was one explanation of their failure to achieve universal literacy. To one perceptive observer, "autobiography and reminiscence, filtered through the distorting lens of romantic ideology and sentiment, serve as substitutes for concrete knowledge." Educational research had not clarified the nation's literary crisis. Nor had it demonstrated that the schools could indeed teach basic academic competencies in reading, writing, and computation. Not only were educational norms and standards conspicuously vague in public schools, but the purposes of secondary education were still confused in the years following national commitments to equal educational opportunity.

Whatever the problems of science, technology, and education might be, they are never solved by national dialogues.

The most publicized criticism of educational research was its ineptness in demonstrating the effectiveness of federally funded programs. Thus, research, along with science and technology, became the messenger to be slain. Education had not become a science and should give up all pretenses and aspirations in that direction. Teaching was not research-based and further instructional development should not be funded.

To say that science, technology, and education were the scapegoats in explaining public disenchantment is to say the obvious. Whatever the problems of science, technology, and education might be, they are never solved by national dialogues. As human endeavors that are at their best when self-organizing and self-directing, science and education should contain within their own ranks their best critics. Whatever the reasons and/or causes of

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educational failures to achieve worthy national goals, they included a national ambivalence that is often expressed toward education, science, technology, and rationality.

For colleges and universities, one implication of the national dialogue concerning science and technology was fairly clear. Education would never become a theory-based, research-driven science and it should never become a technocratic enterprise. Research[4] had shown that generalizations in education were limited to time and place, method and practice, teachers and students—and unlikely to produce law-like principles or to yield well derived and easily verified hypotheses. In similar manner, the transfer of technological triumphs in the aerospace industries[5] was not readily adapted for the solution of societal problems. Where education is concerned, scientific inquiry can be bitterly contested on ideological, political, or social grounds and technological innovation often fails to live up to its promises.

As desirable as a science of education might be in a more manageable world, other alternatives and options often serve the research imperatives of higher education. As colleges and universities have become increasingly complex, they have acquired many features, attributes, characteristics, issues, and problems that invite analysis, interpretation, and explanation. And within their own ranks and with their own resources, there is a challenge to apply scholarly methods of inquiry, analysis, interpretation, and explanation to the issues and problems that impede institutional effectiveness. In their rapid growth and development during the 1960s and 1970s, colleges and universities acquired many new constituencies and characteristics that invite observation, study, and reflection. Programs, services, and activities—old and new—call for critical review, appraisal, and explanation. Thus, in many respects, scholarly inquiry provides its own incentives as systematic, objective, and rational analysis of an indispensable public and national commitment.[6]

RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

If we review the remarkable efforts made to reform higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, we must surely ask why another "era of commission reports" was launched in the 1980s. Looking at the federal programs funded under the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Educational Amendments Act of 1973, the active concern and participation of national associations and organizations, and the prodigious efforts of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) and the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies (CCPS),[7] we can appreciate the growth of doctoral programs in higher education and the establishment of Institutes and Centers for the Study of Higher Education. We must also ask why the benefits of such efforts were not more evident to educators and the general public in the 1980s.

Considering higher education as a special case of the "massive movements" in education at all levels, we can identify, with less difficulty, some of the changing demands and expectations imposed on the nation's institutions of higher learning. Also, we can understand better why highly commendable efforts to sponsor ongoing research and scholarship were not more successful. Stated more specifically, we can comprehend the lack of value and utility that research had in the bitter controversies of 1968-1973 and 1978-1984.

Institutes and Centers: The establishment of centers for research in higher education was part of a larger movement to support research on issues and problems related to education beyond the high school. Centers for the Study of Higher Education were founded at the University of California/Berkeley and the University of Michigan. Institutes of Higher Education were founded at Columbia University and the University of Georgia. Other centers were organized at Pennsylvania State University and the University of Virginia.

The scope and range of the Berkeley Center's research reflect the high expectations for research in the solution of educational

problems. Following the lead of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, the Center at Berkeley purported to study behavioral theories and methods, to disseminate new perspectives on educational issues, to contribute substantially to the behavioral sciences and related literature on colleges and universities, and to develop research and development models in institutional research.

. . . there is considerable irony in the differences between the "research revolution" in which the 1960s began and "the management revolution" in which they ended.

In 1965-1966 the Berkeley Center consisted of 30 professional staff members, 50 graduate assistants, and 8.5 million dollars in research support from twelve sponsoring agencies. Thirty-nine publications and 35 addresses or papers were ample proof of the staff's productivity.[7] When federal funding policies shifted drastically in the late 1960s, it was obvious that dependency on outside funding was detrimental to the continued productivity of research centers and institutes. Concurrent with the re-direction of federal funds were the reports of prestigious committees that acknowledged the national need for both basic and applied research—but called for practical, applied, mission-oriented research that could be used in the improvement of education.

Thus, federal funding policies were shifted "vindictably?" to evaluation research for elementary and secondary schools—and to planning, management, and evaluation for colleges and universities. The contrast between the Center for the Study of Higher Education (at Berkeley) and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (at Boulder) dramatized the changing climate for institutions of higher education. To observers, there is considerable irony in the differences between the "research revolution" in which the 1960s began and "the management revolution" in which they ended.

In retrospect, embarrassing questions could be raised about the increasing distance between funded research and classroom instruction. Research centers, outside the control of academic departments and colleges, were well received as long as research funds supported highly competent adjunct faculty members and bright graduate assistants. Unfortunately, the inconsistencies of funding policies precluded long-term research projects and discouraged the kind of longitudinal studies that might have resolved educational issues. The rewards of research, such as publication in refereed journals, were more amenable to the professionalism of researchers than to keeping up with their chosen academic disciplines. Much more damaging, however, were the conflicting models of research that became more and more specialized. On more than one occasion, this sent researchers in search of problems their methods and models could solve. On other occasions, the researchers' methodological sophistication greatly exceeded the relevance of the problems they solved.

Institutional Research: Critics, friendly and otherwise, have noticed that universities are often engaged in organizational research but seldom spend much time investigating their own organizational structure and internal processes. As a means of studying the inner operations and functions of a college or university, institutional research can be dated from the late 1950s and regarded as an outcome of the same events and movements that spawned the research revolution. As the scope and complexity of universities increased, there were concomitant changes in institutional functions that could be not explained without indepth analysis of antecedent events and ongoing processes. And with the rapid addition of new two-year or four-year colleges, there was an obvious need for better planning, organization, and development.

By the mid-1960s institutional research offices had been established for data-gathering and reporting purposes, if not as a source of

active assistance for administrative decision, campus planning, and program development. And with the increased regulations of federal and state governments, an insatiable demand for enrollment and financial data, and the requests of numerous commissions, committees, panels, and task forces, institutional research became an administrative specialty with varying but necessary responsibilities. In due time institutional research became an essential component of self-studies for accreditation, federal grants to developing institutions, and most forms of institutional or program planning.

On rare occasions, institutional research could focus on organizational and operational characteristics that are usually "off limits" for inquisitive and orderly minds. As examples we can mention: (a) faculty responsibilities that are regarded as within the bounds of academic freedom, (b) administrative appointments, evaluation, and replacement and (c) the cost/effectiveness of closeted matters such as athletics, academic programs (new and old), development offices, alumni relations, etc.

Given a university's diverse programs, services, and activities, the many variations in its different constituencies, and its many different characteristics that are difficult to compare with peer institutions, its reluctance to examine itself critically (or to permit insiders or outsiders the liberties taken by journalist reporters) is understandable. But critical self-study, in the form of objective and systematic inquiry, is exactly what most universities and colleges needed then—and need now! The ability to identify faults, and then to correct them, is surely an indication of maturity for institutions—as much as it is for individuals. And the institution that does not study itself should not be offended when others do.

THE STUDY OF INSTITUTIONS

In the early 1990s it was easy to see why educational research did not have sustained influence in the reform of education at any level. The continuing specialization of research and the creation of educational research departments put too much distance between classroom teachers and college faculty members with their own research agendas. The incentives and rewards of colleges of education placed too much emphasis on publication in refereed journals—and too little emphasis on the interpretation of research findings for the improvement of education.

A soft-and-pliable dichotomy between pure and applied research became a jumble of rigid categories that served faculty vanities without making substantive improvements in faculty teaching, student learning, curriculum development, program evaluation, or promotion-and-tenure policies. If any semblence of a continuum remained, impartial observers would find "qualitative researchers" on one end, see-sawing with "quantitative researchers" on the other. Across campus educational researchers would find colleagues engaged in the "culture wars" that denigrated all notions of continuity between research and scholarship.

The institution that does not study itself should not be offended when others do.

In such a "climate of opinion" it is also easy to see why institutes and centers for the study of higher education did not have more influence in the continuing development of higher education. An ambivalence toward outside funding and ambiguous relations with departments of higher education and/or colleges of education are reason enough for institutes and centers not to be actively involved in major policy decisions. So was the questionable status of professors of higher education in the 1970s, as they were "bumped" from annual meeting to annual meeting until the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) was firmly established. In brief, neither institutes, centers, nor departments of higher education played a major role

in the shaping of national policy during the 1970s and 1980s. All three have served much more effectively at state or regional levels, and all such agencies have learned to live with their ambiguous status in university hierarchies of colleges, schools, divisions, and departments.

In all conflicts involving research and scholarship, there is enough blame to go around. On many occasions universities and their research faculties have used outside funds for inside purposes—and the funding of Regional Laboratories was an explicit effort by Congress to remove educational research and development from the control of universities and/or their faculties. Academic administrators must share the blame whenever they reduce institutional research offices to a staff function of data collection and reporting—without interpretation. In their early years many directors of institutional research were involved in planning, management, and evaluation as a contributing participant. More recently, their knowledge and experience are unavailable to presidents and vice presidents because their advice and counsel are not deemed necessary. Even more detrimental to professional concepts of institutional self-studies is a lack of freedom to investigate issues, problems, and possibilities that are not on administrative agendas.

Doctoral programs in higher education are not noted as an institutional resource for many of the same reasons. By teaching graduate courses in academic administration, governance, finance, history, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation, professors of higher education gain no special credibility among their colleagues. Peer recognition of knowledge and experience in higher education as a field of doctoral study must come from the publishing of refereed journal articles and/or books by reputable commercial presses. Even then, the reaction of many campus colleagues will be, "Of course, we all know that!"

None of the above is a distraction for those of us who regard education as a human enterprise worthy of scholarly inquiry, analysis, and interpretation. There are many research concepts, principles, and practices we can borrow from the behavioral and social sciences, and when they are amenable to educational issues, we should use such methods with skill and candor. Just as surely, there are *creditable, traditional* methods of scholarly inquiry and analysis that we can use effectively and wisely—without apology for doing so.

Higher education, in particular, is a fascinating endeavor that should be studied with the best of scholarly methods—and institutions of higher education should indeed study themselves with what we used to call, "a scientific attitude." As a field of doctoral study, higher education is (or should be) the "study of institutions." Colleges and universities are indeed sociocultural institutions, each with their own constituencies, programs, services, and activities—and for the great majority of them: historical antecedents, explicit purposes and traditional values, common features and significant differences, and interesting outcomes, benefits, and advantages that should be interpreted and explained.

Those of us who have developed programs in higher education now have a remarkable observatory from which to view the academic world. We need not worry whether higher education is an academic discipline or a professional speciality. There is much to observe, study, and learn about colleges and universities—and there is much to challenge those who would satisfy their intellectual curiosity about institutions that are unique but unusually utilitarian.

And if we agree that many fine starts were made in the 1950s and 1960s to study and comprehend American higher education, we can appreciate how many commendable efforts are turned aside by events beyond the control of institutions and individuals. Foregoing all aspirations to scientifically predict and control such events, why not observe and study carefully their influence on present challenges and possibilities?

ENDNOTES

1. Anicius Manilus Severinus Boethius (c. 480-524), condemned by the Roman Senate, was visited by "Lady Philosophy" who personified a way of life in dealing with its serious and perennial problems. Later in "an age of anxiety" the consolation that Boethius gained from philosophy would have been called "peace of mind."

2. Harry Broudy, in "The Search for a Science of Education" *Phi Delta Kappan* (September 1976).

3. "America's Schools: Public and Private" *Daedalus* (Summer 1981); and American's Schools: Portraits and Perspectives", *Daedalus* (Fall 1981). The "perceptive observer" quoted was Stephen R. Graubard, Editor.

4. Lee Cronbach and Richard Snow, *Aptitudes and Instructional Methods* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1977).

5. Ida R. Hoos, *Systems Analysis in Public Policy: A Critique*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

6. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1966-1973): over 103 volumes, including research reports, policy reports, and technical reports; Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1973-1984): was no less productive but focused more closely on national policy issues.

7. Center for Research and Development in Higher Education (1966), *Annual Report: 1965-1966.* (Berkeley: University of California, CRDHE).

8. See "The Possibilities and Actualities of Disciplined Inquiry," Research in Higher Education, 1991, 32, 6, 625-650 where the author also uses "The Consolation of Scholarship" as indicative of the advantages and benefits of scholarly research.

THIS ISSUE OF . . .

IHE PERSPECTIVES discusses some of the difficulties that colleges and universities encounter whenever they seek to study themselves. Despite many commendable efforts to establish doctoral programs in higher education, institutes and centers for the study of higher education, and offices of institutional research, there are many discrepancies between what we know and what we believe about institutions of higher learning.

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